

Acts 7:44-50

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Stephen changes subjects to the Temple, because he has been accused of being an enemy of the Temple. He describes the history of the tabernacle, designed by God to reflect Heaven, which eventually became the Temple in Jerusalem. But Stephen points out that God is not contained to the Temple. God is God; His throne is Heaven. He is above all things. He made all things. The man-made Temple is not the point. It's our hearts He desires.

Stephen is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the council of 70 Pharisees and Sadducees, and the High Priest. The charge against Stephen is that he is an enemy of the Temple and the Law of Moses. But Stephen is taking this opportunity, led by the Spirit, to confront these religious leaders. He gives a sermon that summarizes relevant sections of the Old Testament, answering the accusations against him concerning the Temple and Moses.

In contrast to the “tabernacle of Moloch,” which was symbolic of Israel’s constant idol-worship, Stephen points out that *Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness.*

The Sanhedrin has accused Stephen of blaspheming Moses and the Temple. Stephen has already displayed his deep understanding of Moses, and how Moses is a deliverer that was rejected by their fathers. Now he addresses the *tabernacle*, the first temple for the Israelites when they wandered in the *wilderness*. The *tabernacle* was built *just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. He who spoke to Moses* is God, who gave him the entire blueprint to the smallest detail of what the tabernacle was, its layout, what colors and materials must be used to make it.

God spends two chapters in the Bible describing the creation of the Heavens and the Earth and eight chapters talking about the construction and blueprint of the tabernacle. Likely because the tabernacle is a copy of the true thing in heaven (Hebrews 8:5). In response to the accusation that Stephen is an enemy of the Temple, that he “speaks against” it (Acts 13:14), here Stephen shows that he understands and honors the history of the Temple as it pertains to Israel, while understanding it on a far more spiritual level, a level that the Sanhedrin overlooks. To show this, Stephen summarizes the history of the *tabernacle*, which evolved into what was at that time Herod’s Temple:

After *having received* the tabernacle *in their turn*, it was carried and passed on from the generation that built it in the wilderness to the generation that would take possession of the Promised Land, thus *our fathers brought the tabernacle in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations* (the Canaanites) *whom God drove out before our fathers* (the conquest of Canaan, Exodus 34:11; Deuteronomy 11:23, Joshua 11:23). After the conquest, the *tabernacle* was established in Shiloh:

“Then the whole congregation of the sons of Israel assembled themselves at Shiloh, and set up the [tabernacle] there; and the land was subdued before them.”
(Joshua 18:1)

Apparently the wilderness tabernacle remained pitched in Shiloh: “all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh” (Judges 18:31, see side bar on archeological discoveries in Shiloh indicating the location of the wilderness tabernacle). This was *until the time of David*, where *David* made a temporary *tabernacle* in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:17). King *David found favor in God’s sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob*, “Behold, I am dwelling in a house of cedar, but the ark of the covenant of the Lord is under curtains” (1 Chronicles 17:1). David wished to build a permanent building to replace the traveling tent Israel had used in the wilderness, and move the location to Jerusalem.

However, God wanted the Temple to be built by a man of peace, rather than David, whose reign was full of wars and bloodshed (1 Chronicles 22:8). Instead, God chose for David’s son to build the Temple: *But it was Solomon who built a house for Him* (1 Kings 8:1-11). Solomon built the first permanent structure temple in Jerusalem.

Stephen explains all of this to show that he knows where the Temple comes from, where it has been, and what it became. But then he pulls the rug out from under the Council by saying, *However*. He will now show a much more meaningful understanding of the difference between tents and temples and the actual presence of God:

However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands. God’s presence may have come down into the Ark of the Covenant, but the Ark of the Covenant did not contain God. Nor did the Tabernacle, nor the Temple. God is omnipresent. He does not *dwell in houses made by human hands*. He is the *Most High*, He does not *dwell* anywhere.

God is in Heaven, on the Throne, yet He is also God. He is not contained to any fixed point in space, any dimension. He is beyond everything. Stephen is making the argument that the Sanhedrin’s understanding of God and what God values is too small. It is too limited. To think the glory of God is relegated to the Ark of the Covenant is to literally “put God in a box.” Stephen is showing that not only has the Sanhedrin rejected God and God’s Prophet, just as the ancient Israelites did, they are also concerned with material objects, idols. They uphold the Temple and the Law, and seem to view God as subservient to both, which means they can control God. In some sense, the Temple itself has become an idol in their minds, since they think they control it. Stephen quotes another *prophet*, Isaiah, from Isaiah 66:1-2:

as the prophet says:

*‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is the footstool of My feet;
What kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord,
‘Or what place is there for My repose?
Was it not My hand which made all these things?’*

What is God's *throne*? A *throne* made by *human hands*? No, His *throne* is *Heaven*. What is *earth*? It's only a *footstool* for His *feet*. There is a mocking tone in this metaphor to try to fix the false perspective of those to whom God is talking. He asks rhetorically *What kind of house* will men *build* for Him? What *place is there* for His *repose*, for Him to rest and take refuge? He dismisses this small, worldly perspective of who He really is by asking, *Was it not My hand which made all these things*? What temple can house God? None can. Anything built by man does not impress God, not on a cosmic level. He made everything. Everything we make is simply a reordering of what He has already made. To think that the temple is where God is located, and only the priests have access to Him, is fundamentally flawed.

Again, the pagan religions the Israelites were constantly being tempted by or falling into, to Moloch or to a golden calf they made with their own jewelry, these were all based on idols made by *human hands*. Not only were the gods themselves made by man, the rules were made by man. The religious system was invented by men so that they could control the gods they had made, to give them divine permission to sin and exploit one another. If the people sacrificed to the idols the right way, they would be given what they desired (most often this involved sexual sin, a justification to pursue lust to "please" the gods).

And, by implication, the Sanhedrin is treating the true God of Israel as an idol. Their concern is for the rules, the Law, and for the Temple. These are things that support their own political and religious authority over others. They are not focused on pleasing God Himself, otherwise they wouldn't have crucified the Son of God. They would have recognized Jesus for who He really was had they been walking in God's will. These Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, care about the Temple because it is their place of business. It is their seat of power from where they rule, and in some cases, exploit the people (Luke 20:47, Matthew 21:12-13).

But Stephen is saying, "God is not contained by the temple. *Heaven* is His *throne*. He rests His feet on *earth*, it's something beneath Him, it does not control Him."

Stephen is undercutting their accusation that he is against the Temple. The charge against him was, "we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy [the Temple] and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (Acts 6:14). Stephen is essentially saying that the council doesn't really understand the Temple, nor do they understand God or the things of God.

The Temple was built to represent something much bigger than the building itself. It was built to represent God's presence. The reality is that Jesus eliminated the need for a physical representation of God's presence, because He was God dwelling among men. He was the true temple (John 2:19-22). He did build it back in three days, because He rose from the grave after three days (Luke 24:6-7). Now he sits at the right hand of the Father. Jesus came to fulfill the customs of Moses, not alter them, and that is what the Sanhedrin does not want to hear. They want the customs of Moses to serve them. They don't want to serve God or any of the representatives He has sent them (Joseph, Moses, Jesus).

Stephen has set the table for his argument. He has shown the two types of Christ ("Messiah," someone sent by God) from the Old Testament: Joseph, the firstborn/ruler and Moses the deliverer. He has gone over the history of the Temple. It began as a tabernacle, and he showed

how the people of Israel profaned it. God's presence was with them, just as God's presence is with us through the Holy Spirit. And when we sin and walk our own way, we profane it.

It's the heart that God desires.

King David understood this:

“For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”
(Psalm 51:16-17)

And it is possible that the prophet Samuel instructed him in this understanding:

“Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
As in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.”
(1 Samuel 15:22)

Here Stephen is showing the religious leaders of Israel that they value things that they can possess and control, buildings and rituals, more than they actually follow God.

Biblical Text

**44 “Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. 45 And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. 46 David found favor in God’s sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. 48 However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says:
49 ‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is the footstool of My feet;
What kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord,
‘Or what place is there for My repose?
50 ‘Was it not My hand which made all these things?’**